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MEMO FOR THE RECORD

Visit to an Insecure Province (Hau Nghia, October 1965)

Daniel Ellsberg

Introduction

1. Late Sunday afternoon, 17 October 1965, I drove from Saigon to Bao Trai, province capital of Hau Nghia, with John Paul Vann, the USOM Provincial Representative. The next day we drove to each of the four districts of Hau Nghia, visiting a number of hamlets, each of the district towns and sub-sector advisor posts, and several refugee relocation centers; we travelled on every passable road in the province. On Tuesday I spent most of the day talking to the MACV sector advisory staff, and drove back to Saigon with Vann and the province chief, Lt. Col. Hanh, in the evening.

2. In the course of three days I had considerable opportunity to hear Vann's views on the current situation in South Vietnam, and what might be done about it. I think these deserve the attention of the team. But since his view of the current scene is chill, and his proposals radical, I have preceded an exposition of his thesis (Part III) with a long travelogue -- soundtrack by Vann-- of our trip through the province (Part I) and an account of my discussions with the MACV advisors and with Doug Ramsey, Vann's assistant (Part II), both of which gave a great deal of support to Vann's generalizations and interest to his recommendations.

3. I have described my day on the road at great length -- I promise never to do this again -- because it did give so much color to Vann's propositions. And it was an education for me. With Vann's running commentary on this drive through roads and hamlets mainly abandoned by the GVN, I got a microscopic view of the guerrilla war and political campaign, a feel -- very hard to acquire from a helicopter or official cables -- of the slum-like intimacy of contact in the hamlets between the NLF agents and the villagers, the soccer-field intimacy between the guerrillas and the RF/PF troops on the outskirts of town and the surrounding countryside.

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4. When I asked Vann, Monday night, what lesson he particularly wanted me to take away from our excursion, he said immediately: "the thinness of control by either the VC or the GVN." Vann believes that control of the country-side -- now administered in Hau Nghia overwhelmingly by the VC -- can be wrested from the Communists in many (not all) areas by rather simple changes in GVN/ARVN activity. But those "simple" changes would be revolutionary departures for ARVN and the GVN. And Vann does not think they will happen without major US initiatives and intervention.

5. Hau Nghia is a very insecure province. It may be, in the patterns I shall describe, unique. Vann doesn't think so.

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PART I: Travelogue

1. Our excursion on 18 October took us to the four districts of Hau Nghia -- Duc Hue, Trang Bang, Cu Chi and Duc Hoa -- and over all the roads of the province that were not physically blocked. Vann and his assistant, Doug Ramsey, maintain a map in their office showing the latest status of the roads as "Passable--not hazardous", as passable but "slightly", "moderately", "extremely hazardous", and as (physically) "Impossible". Over the long stretches of "moderately hazardous" road, Vann drove fairly fast, 80-90 kilometers. On brief stretches of "extremely hazardous" road, he drove very fast, 90-110 kilometers -- with one hand on an AR-15 pointed out the window, extra ammo around his shoulder and grenades in his belt.

(On the most incident-prone of these portions--18 KIA a month on a 2-kilometer stretch -- our 110 kph progress was halted for 45 minutes by some cars mired down where the road had been destroyed two days earlier and badly repaired. We pulled a car loose with a tow rope, got stuck ourselves and were pulled out; meanwhile, five individuals had come up separately to tell us, in various ways, to "leave quickly" because there were VC on both sides of the road. We left as quickly as we could.)

He drove without bravado, giving very serious attention to what he was doing and to reducing the risks, and giving me running lessons on what to watch for and what to do. ("Vann doesn't take any risks he doesn't have to," an experienced USOM colleague told me, "short of abandoning the roads to the VC.")

2. Side comments on road security: "The roads are generally clear from mines by 10-11 in the morning; the VC have either blown them already or RF road-clearing details have found them." (However, a mine was blown at 1500 that day--killing 5 RF troops in a foot column and wounding 7 -- on a stretch of road we had driven over at 1100.) The mines are almost all wire-controlled; and

the electric circuits sometimes have delays in them, so it is hard for the controller (who may be 400-500 yards away) to hit a fast-moving vehicle. It is common for a mine to go off behind a vehicle moving fast; the VC prefer to wait for a convoy, so that they have the best chance of getting one. (One informant led them to a row of 20 105 mm shells controlled by a single wire.) "Some day they may catch on that the way to get a single fast vehicle -- like Ramsey or me -- is to blow the mine just ahead of us!"

They use enormous quantities of explosive for many of these mines--as much as 100-200 kilos of plastic explosive have been uncovered, though 15-20 kilos are more normal, so craters are typically 6-7 feet deep, with one crater 11 feet deep (sand bags in the car would be of little help). In a road ambush, the local guerrillas do not usually lay an obstacle across the road, though a water buffalo may serve as a mobile barrier. The best tactic is to drive right through it; "they're very poor shots, like ARVN--the weapons are too big for them, and so is the kick--and the guerrillas are not like good regular soldiers, they'll scatter and duck if you fire back in their general direction." (Vann has now driven through three ambushes, one involving 15 men close in on both sides of the road, and Ramsey has been through two).

"You're safest in a single, unmarked vehicle, driving fast at irregular times, during the day." (On the way out from Saigon, Vann deliberately avoided joining the Province Chief's small convoy, and on the way back on Tuesday he gave in to the Chief's insistence that we ride in his car with considerable reluctance: "We're so much more likely to get our ass blown off in this convoy than in my Scout", he told me.

Water and Fish

3. "This is a PF outpost", says Vann; the PFs wave at us, behind their barbed wire and moat, lying on top of their concrete tower. "This one has an accommodation with the VC". How could one say that? "This post has had no contact with the VC in months; no casualties, hasn't been attacked. Now, you see this wreck next to it?" We stopped and looked at a skeleton of a building, only part of the frame and a few sheets of roofing, in the same open field as the PF outpost. It was surrounded by brand-new barbed wire; every section had been cut and trampled into the ground. "That's a PF training center we've been trying to build. The VC have torn it down

five times. Last time was three nights ago. They ripped the boards and the roofing off, tore up the wire. It's exactly 117 paces to that post. But the PFs didn't hear anything, didn't see anything--didn't do anything". Some workers were lying nearby, taking siesta. "Those are the construction workers. Some of them probably helped tear it down."

4. Could the "accomodation" simply be tacit: we won't bother you, so you don't bother us? "Hell no, it's not tacit. We get the information; while those VC workers are out there, tearing up the building and making a hell of a racket, they're yelling right into this post: "We're your brothers. Why are you working for the Americans and the traitors in Saigon?" And most of the time where these little deals are made, the PF leader or hamlet chief has talked face to face with the VC commissar."

When we drove by the post two days later, on the return to Saigon, the last sheets of roofing had been removed from the training center, and the wire was further tangled.

5. Again and again we rode over a patch where the road had been recently trenched and then filled in, or where a dirt wall had been built across it, or a large mine hole filled; in nearly every case, there would be a PF outpost 50-100 meters away. This was no coincidence. The VC were deliberately cutting and mining the road--with much hand labor, pick-and-shovel work that could probably be heard for half a mile--within eyesight and earshot of GVN soldiers, PF posts and even district towns with RF detachments. The lesson, for the villagers, was pretty plain.

6. It was also pretty plain that one could find VC local guerrillas when one wanted to, without going very far. The roads were being cut or mined, or ambushes laid, in exactly the same spots day after day, sometimes four or five times in a row. "If I wanted to meet some guerrillas, I'd wait in the ditch any night next to the Sui Sau bridge", the MACV S-2 advisor told me (pointing to the bridge, locally known as "Sui Cide", where we had been stopped for 45 minutes the day before.) That there is abundant information on which to find guerrillas is shown by the record of the Chieu Hoi platoon; out of 17 operations in August, armed only with hand grenades, it made contact with VC 14 times, killing 11 VC. The I&R Platoon made contact 6 times in 8 operations. Both of

Page 4

these go where the VC can be expected to be (on the basis of information and of past patterns of VC behavior).

In the same month, the 49th Regiment of the 25th Division reported conducting more than 1,400 small unit actions, 605 of them at night. They reported contact with the VC 16 times; no VC were killed. (Nor were any VC killed in the several large-scale operations; the 49th Regiment killed no VC in August).

This pattern of almost no contact and few casualties inflicted or suffered on offensive operations is not peculiar to the 49th regiment or to John Vann's province. On my return, I began checking the countrywide figures. On 17 October, 2677 small-unit actions were reported countrywide, with 13 contacts; on 18 October, 2922 actions, 22 contacts; on 22 October, 2852 actions, 8 contacts. Of these 43 contacts, 13 were at night, when the VC rules the countryside. A live VC is hard to find: for ARVN.

In the last two weeks in October, out of 41,498 reported small-unit actions -- 2988 of them US, or less than 8% -- there were 554 contacts, of which 326, almost 60%, were by US units. Thus, more than 10% of small-unit action by the US "strangers" resulted in contact, compared to less than 1% for ARVN units.

7. "The theory they give us for the outposts" the MACV S-5 advisor told me, "is that they serve as bases, from which they can do night patrolling". In reality, as he and everyone else I asked confirmed, the PFs simply do not move from those posts at night. Most of the posts in Hau Nghia are along major routes, guarding roads rather than villages; even those associated with a village are at one end, on the outskirts. The "security" they provide the villagers at night is not even problematic. And the arrogance of the VC, tearing up roads, killing hamlet officials and abducting passengers from busses virtually at the front gate of the outposts, underlines the point.

Page 4a

8. As for the RFs and the 25th Division:

- a. Most of the small unit actions reported, especially alleged night actions, are either simply fictitious or should not properly be listed as "Actions" (thus, the small total number of contacts is more significant than the low ratio of contacts to "Actions");
- b. When they do venture out, it is to go places where the VC can be expected not to be (intelligence is good enough for that, too);
- c. Large-scale operations can be expected to be compromised in advance (the MACV S-2 and S-3 advisors told me) by VC penetrations of headquarters and supporting units and by non-existent communications security;
- d. According to the U.S. advisor to the 49th Regiment, "nearly every regimental plan is changed in many ways by 25th Division headquarters and virtually every change is such as to reduce the chance of contact or to allow the VC an avenue of escape: changing the axis of approach, removing the blocking force, leaving an open flank.";
- e. Above all, the RF companies and the 25th Division simply do not venture west across the Vaico Oriental river, where the 506th VC regional battalion is home -based and from where

it sallies from time to time to inflict heavy casualties. A month ago the 506th crossed over the river at night, walked through half the province to Duc Lap, where it forced the Ranger Battalion to evacuate with many casualties while it occupied the town, returning west of the river by morning. (Since this was written, Duc Lap was again overrun by VC, including units of the 503th on 27 October. Although the encounter resulted in very heavy VC losses, the Ranger Battalion was subsequently withdrawn from Duc Lap).

The sector advisory team and the regimental advisor (I didn't talk to the Division advisory staff) told me they urge "daily" that each one of these patterns be changes; with what they describe as zero success.

9. In the morning we arrived at Dong Hoa hamlet, part of Hiep Hoa village in Duc Hue district, just after a graduation ceremony for a PF platoon that had received Motivational Indoctrination training. The Province Chief and Sector Advisor and their staffs had arrived for the occasion by helicopter.

This little area illustrated many of the complexities of "security" in Hau Nghia. Dong Hoa is carried on the charts as "black", "secured", although it is surrounded by "red". This is because it is the location of a big sugar mill (generally called the "Hiep Hoa sugar mill") which has never been attacked since it was constructed in 1923. "Notice the plate glass windows", Vann said, pointing to the housing next to the mill. The mill's sanctuary reflects the payment of what is reported to be 1,700,000 piasters a year to the VC. It is jointly owned by French and the GVN (inherited, I believe, from Mme. Nhu); hearsay is that the French interest is unlikely to be expropriated, because it makes payment of the VC tax less embarrassing. The mill is unlikely to be attacked. But despite the serenity of Dong Hoa, the U.S. Advisory Staff to the Duc Hue Sub-sector had just been removed from the hamlet "for security reasons": because of VC control of the surrounding area.

Meanwhile, Dong Hoa Bac, the hamlet just the other side of the Vaico Oriental River, was likewise carried as "GVN" -- the only hamlet west of the river so listed-- though it was in "deep red" country. How did its PF post survive? "By an accommodation", says Vann; the hamlet is, in fact, VC controlled, and the fiction that it is a GVN hamlet is maintained only to permit the

Page 6.

province to show one such hamlet west of the river. It was the PF platoon and Dong Hoa Bac that had just received Motivational Indoctrination training; why the District Chief had picked this particular platoon was not clear. Just two nights before, the VC had broken their truce with the hamlet by lobbing some mortar shells into the PF post; evidently to remind everyone, just before graduation, that Motivational Indoctrination training wasn't going to change any of the realities of the situation.

However, because of the ceremony, the Province Chief and the staffs accompanied the PF platoon as they returned across the river, and visited the post briefly. We went along. "This is quite an occasion", Vann told me. "This is only the second time that the Province Chief has ever been to this hamlet, i.e., been west of the river. The previous chief never went. You'll be the first civilian--beside Ramsey and me--to be across the river in a couple of years".

While the chief was in a dugout in the post, Vann motioned me to follow him down a path between the river and a row of huts. "Watch this guard", he said, "he'll be very unhappy when we move off the tour, he probably won't let us go left here". The guard said nothing. "That's funny", Vann said, "they made a big stink when I tried to walk down here last time". (What struck me about these observations--which came early in the day--was that the Province Chief and his guard were only a few yards behind us, and the apparently "dangerous zone" was separated from the outpost defenses by several paces). But after a few minutes we ran into the Province Chief and his guards, who had come around the back way. "Ah, that's it", Vann said; "this is on the tour today".

10. Close by, we gave a lift to the cadre of the Motivational Training course, who had flown to a neighboring village by helicopter. They had changed into civilian clothing and left all weapons and documents identifying them as cadre behind, because they were going to ride on a public bus, and didn't want to be abducted from it by VC "road agents" (as were three ARVN soldiers on leave, that afternoon).

11. Near Dong Hoa we entered Tan Hoa hamlet, now the seat of the village of Hiep Hoa (Hiep Hoa hamlet had become too insecure to be the village hamlet). It is shown as "blue"--"undergoing securing"--on the map and has

Page 7.

cadre in the daytime; but all of these, including the village chief, move to Dong Hoa every night, to the security of the sugar mill. We drove slowly along a canal to a dead-end, then turned back. "These people are pretty surprised to see us", Vann said. "They haven't seen anyone connected with the GVN poke down this street for a hell of a long time". They looked surprised; though when I waved, they smiled and waved back. At one point we passed a gathering of a dozen black-clad boys in their early twenties: draft-age, but not in our army. "There's little doubt you're looking at a VC squad", Vann said, so I took a picture. They straightened up and smiled.

Back at the marketplace, two blocks further on, I got out and took some pictures, till Vann honked the horn. "Let's move out", he said, "they're starting to move away from the car". There was now a noticeable empty space around the Scout. "We're safe for a little while, because they don't expect to see us and it takes them a few minutes to react. But eventually, one of the people back there is going to start thinking about collecting the 20,000 piastre reward and the gold medal the VC gives out for a dead American". As we were leaving, the district chief arrived in a jeep, preceded by a jeepload OF APAs. "This may be the most corrupt district chief in Vietnam", Vann said; "we're investigating him. He always uses the APAs as his bodyguard". "But I thought you said no GVN official ever came this way" I asked. "That was behind the wire; see that wire we passed, on the other side of the market, as we started to go along that canal? The district chief isn't going to pass that wire--no GVN official will, or has". The other side of the tracks, in short.

12. This was the pattern of the day: no doubt familiar to most members of the team, but an education for me. I've described it in detail to convey the impression I got of being closely surrounded in both hamlets and countryside by little signs--visible to all--saying, "To find VC, turn left--about 10 feet", "This bridge closed for mining, tonight and every night", "GVN not welcome here", or "GVN traffic on this road only between 0700 and 1800, VC traffic only between 1800 and 0700" (like Washington streets that are one-way in opposite directions during morning and evening rush-hours). (One road we did not go down. At an intersection, Vann pointed right and said, "if you want to meet VC with 100% certainty, day or night, just go into that treeline, 400 yards off. Some Polish journalists wanted to meet VC; the

Page 8.

VC met them at the treeline, burned their jeep and kept them for three days. They got a good story".)

12a. One break in this pattern was An Ea, a Catholic community with a churchyard and gardens as pretty as a New England village. The hamlet is very safe "I'd sleep here any night, without a gun"--without barbed wire. "The priest here says if any VC enters anywhere in the hamlet, he knows of it within 10 minutes--and he reacts". The VC stay clear of it. The VNAF, however, tore it to pieces early in the year, by mistake, causing many casualties. Vann and the sector advisor had just gotten some MILCAP compensation to them; the only MILCAP paid during the year, amounting to the first quarter's allowance for the province.

13. At various times during the day Vann stopped to talk business with sub-sector advisory teams, in particular suggesting a range of projects for them to spend their new piaster fund on. He also had business with Captain Hiep, the district chief of Duc Hoa, whom he praised as an outstanding officer. Barry Sutherland, the Australian supervising the construction advisory crew working throughout SVN also praised Hiep: "He's a unique Vietnamese; he gets things done. And he's honest and he cares about the people". When the district hospital was taken over by the army, Hiep had gotten another one built by the people. (Vann's comment on many of the self-help projects: "The province chief calls them "Help Self". The theory is that they're what the people want, and they'll contribute the labor. The villagers ask for schools, clinics, soccer fields; but somehow when the request comes up through the village and district chiefs, the people usually turn out to want new hamlet offices. The people aren't interested in working on that, so we end up buying labor and using a contractor anyway.")

Incidentally, to get to Duc Hoa we had to go through Gia Dinh Province, a roundabout route that takes more than 50 kilometers from Bao Trai instead of 11 kilometers direct; the direct road has been physically cut, and the RFs have given up trying to keep it repaired.

14. Nearly all of the people we passed seemed very friendly, especially to Vann. "I'm usually on hand when anything gets passed out", Vann said. "They associate me with goodies". What surprised me was that the villagers seemed just as friendly in the hamlets we passed through that were controlled by the VC; although VC guerrillas slept in those huts every night and VC political cadre

Page 9.

held meetings and discussion frequently. "They are friendly. They're friendly people", Vann said, when I asked whether I should take their smiles and return waves as purely hypocritical (hard to do). "They don't hate individual Americans, even in VC territory. And incidentally, they see a lot more Americans now--who are friendlier than the French were--than they ever saw Frenchmen, out here in the provinces. On the other hand, even in the places the VC don't control, friendliness doesn't mean these people are going to involve themselves to help you out. These people smiling at us right now would smile just as warmly--and be perfectly honest about it--if they knew that in another 10 yards we were going to be blown up by a mine the VC laid last night; and they wouldn't say anything".

(As Vann wrote in one of his monthly reports: The people have come to believe in VC promises of retribution more than in GVN promises of protection and help, so they aren't inclined to volunteer information. It's true that several bystanders at the Sui Sau bridge did warn us to leave because there were VC in the treelines on both sides of the road, a few hundred yards off; but they were stuck with us in the mud and the traffic jam, so they couldn't get out of the line of fire).

"The children are different", Vann said. "No matter what they hear at night, they go by what they see, and if you're nice to them they trust you. I've had kids warn me along the road, a number of times, not to go into a hamlet because the VC were there; I turn right around. I give out a whole lot of gum along these roads".

15. That night, in a meeting with a Filipino medical team that had just arrived for a two-week stay in Hau Nghia to give standard medical aid, Vann learned that the team actually had surgical background. By the next morning--which began with a half-hour bombardment by B-52's, plainly visible over our heads, that shook the walls of the houses hard though the bombs were falling in the neighboring province, 23 kilometers away--Vann was busy drawing on his brand-new contingency fund to make a temporary surgical operating room out of a large provincial meeting hall. By mid-morning chalk-lines were laid out on the floor to mark partitions and workmen were pounding holes in the cement floor; it was ready by that evening. "Without this fund, it would have taken months to get a project like this all staffed through the Ministry", Vann said. "The team would have been long gone". Since the team had brought none of their surgical instruments

Page 10.

with them to South Vietnam, Vann was going into Saigon that night to find some and bring them back. (In the attack in Duc Lap after this was written, 27 October 65, this team was the only surgical team in the area; it treated many casualties immediately.)

16. We ate our meals both days with the Province Chief, Lt. Col. Hanh. Vann eats all his meals with Hanh (he supplies much of the food and all the wine and liquor). He gets on obviously well with Hanh, they talk business together very freely, and they respect each other. But Hanh is a depressed man. (In part because of troubles with Division and Saigon; though Vann told me "his real trouble with Division is me. Because of me, he keeps making proposals they don't like.") The only time I saw him smile, rather painfully, was when he told a joke, Tuesday night, surrounded by his wife and seven children at dinner in Saigon. "There are 220,000 people in Hau Nghia, and 200,000 of them are ruled by the VC", he said. "I am not a province chief; I am a hamlet chief."

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PART II: The Advisors' Story

1. I spent most of Tuesday talking with the sector advisory staff, including the S-2, S-5, S-3 advisor and the sector advisor.

Vann was not present during these talks; he was busy, and said I should hear a different point of view, though one advisor remarked, "We've all been brainwashed by Vann."

What they had to tell me departed in no detail from the patterns Vann had described.

2. Most of the sector intelligence comes from "agent" (actually informant) reporting. Most of the artillery and air strikes are based on such reporting, and the results are likewise known only by an after-strike report from the same informant. Of most of this information, and most of the informants, they have no real basis for judging reliability; in particular, for those in territory strongly controlled by the VC -- e.g., all the area of Duc Hue district on the west side of the Vaico Oriental River -- there is scarcely any independent source of information apart from these resident informants. Yet air strikes and artillery are used very generously on the basis of their reports.

3. Supposedly all air missions are to be checked with the province chief; actually, many missions occur without having been so cleared. The province chief's request for an air strike can't be vetoed by the sector advisor, even though it may be an American plane that will fulfill the request. At most, the sector advisor's failure to send up a parallel request, if in fact he disapproves, may be taken into account at higher echelons.

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4. The advisors have totally failed to get the sector S-2, S-3 or deputy for security to use ground reconnaissance to check out informant reports. They do call in observation planes to cover the area of the report; if these planes see anything corroborating the report, especially if the plane is fired upon, an air or artillery strike will be ordered. But more often the plane sees nothing, which is always taken as definitive negative evidence; even though subsequent events have often proven that the VC had been hiding directly below in great strength.

Neither will ARVN units check intelligence with ground patrols. Nor do either ARVN or RF units, when they do mount a large operation on the basis of a report, precede the large formation with a patrol; so that usually the battalion or larger unit wastes its day searching an empty area. And when contact is made it tends to be in the form of a VC ambush (often when troops are returning from the operation). Meanwhile, many of the other reports left ignored -- or checked only by air -- might have developed valid contacts if they had been checked by ground probes.

"They just won't send a small force out; we haven't been able to sell our philosophy of active reconnaissance. And they can't see the need for an advance patrol; they say if there's something there, the small unit will get clobbered. The S-2 advisor said, 'they don't see the price they pay, in ambushes, in waste activity, in reports that never get checked out, and in useless air and artillery missions that cause needless civilian deaths.'"

5. S-2 advisors have had no greater luck getting their counterparts to observe better -- in fact, any -- command post and communications security. The result is that when they do mount an operation, again and again the villagers say that the VC had moved out that morning, telling the villagers that ARVN was coming through that afternoon.

6. All confirmed, at great length, the patterns of ARVN tactical behavior and failure to seek or close with the VC described by Vann; and their own failure to change these patterns. They summarized: PF troops sat in their outposts, failing to interfere even with mining and roadcutting operations going on almost within a stone (or grenade) throw; RF troops sat in district towns (controlled by district chiefs, who were appointed by Corps and not subject to much influence by the province chief), leaving mainly for road-clearing details and participation in sweeps with ARVN; the ARVN units engaged in large-scale operations "designed to avoid contact -- and succeeding.

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7. Later in the day, Vann told a story. "One day an old lady walked into a district town and reported that 400 VC had moved into her hamlet. The deputy for security got excited and wanted to call in artillery and an air strike immediately. The sector advisor and I happened to be there at that moment with the province chief, and we pointed out that that hamlet had a lot of people in it. Why not check the report out first? We reminded the province chief that there was a ranger battalion carrying out a search operation just two or three kilometers from the village; they could send a patrol over to see whether there's anything there. If there were, he could mount a ground operation; or then he could call in artillery and air, if there were really anything like that number of VC. Finally the province chief agreed, and he got on the phone to the battalion commander.

"The commander refused; he said 'You want me to send a patrol against 400 men! They'd be slaughtered.' We told the province chief, first, we didn't know there were 400 men there, or any; and second, we just wanted to find out; the patrol didn't have to attack them. You can send a squad against an army, for reconnaissance; it doesn't have to get killed." The province chief finally gave an order. The battalion commander said that his men would carry it out after their siesta, which was just beginning.

"Three hours later the battalion commander said his troops were too tired to carry out the patrol. The sector advisor and I pointed out to the province chief that his men had been resting now for over three hours, and the hamlet was about 3 kilometers away. But the battalion wouldn't move. Late that afternoon, there was an air strike on the hamlet; I don't know exactly how that happened.

"Finally, at the end of the day, I heard terrific firing at the outskirts of town. I thought we were being attacked, so I drove over. It was the ranger battalion returning to town. They had been firing their weapons from their trucks at powerlines and buildings; they had destroyed a number of lines. The battalion commander -- who later complained officially to division that the province chief had improperly ordered him to send his troops against overwhelming forces -- reported officially that his troops had 'been firing to express their relief at having avoided an excessively dangerous operation.'"

(The essentials of this -- to a newcomer -- incredible tale have been reported in the monthly reports of the sector advisor and provincial representative, which I have read.)

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Pacification

8. Much of my observation and discussion in Hau Nghia bore on the question I raised at several Saigon briefings: "How do you tell how to paint the map?" (By common agreement, Hau Nghia is mostly "red".) More generally: What is the meaning in operational terms of the common pacification categories, and of "control" by VC or GVN?

9. Let's start with the standard statistics, as shown on the chart in the Province Representative's office. (All figures as of 17 October 1965.)

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|---------|-----|
| Secured: | 11,920 | 5% | |
| Undergoing securing: | 29,576 | 13% | |
| Cleared: | 51,637 | 23% | |
| VC hamlets (scheduled for RC): | 90,482 | | |
| VC (other) | 42,498 | | |
| Totals: | VC | 132,980 | 59% |
| | GVN | 93,133 | 41% |
| | Population | 226,113 | |
| | RC Program: | 181,882 | |

10. These are the categories used in reporting to the Ministry of Rural Construction. How are they interpreted by province officials? (a) "Secured" means meeting the "6-point criterion," which includes conducting a census, recruiting and training village defense forces (Popular Forces), constructing defenses (e.g., PF outpost, barbed wire or moat), destroying VC infrastructure, and electing village chiefs and councils. Six hamlets in Hau Nghia meet these criteria. (But last elections were generally in 1961-62; less than half of PF's in the province receive training; and VC infrastructure is either ignored or simply identified as suspects in police files.)

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(b) "Undergoing securing" means that government cadre either are in or have been in the hamlet for the purpose of helping it to meet the six-point criterion. (In virtually no case do the cadre stay in a hamlet, or even in a village area or PF outpost, at night; and in some cases in this category, cadre are no longer working at all in the village because of insecurity).

(c) "Cleared" means that a military operation has been conducted in the area to clear it of major VC units. (In no case does this mean that an ARVN unit has stayed in an area, conducting patrolling and ambushing, for the relatively long periods -- a month or more -- envisioned in the MACV concept of a "clear and hold" operation. The "clearing" operation extends from a few hours to a few days, after which the local guerrillas can be assumed to return from their brief displacement).

(d) Hamlets and areas shown as "VC" are those which meet none of the above -- rather meager -- requirements. They are divided into those that are scheduled, eventually, for such operations, and those that are not even scheduled. Thus, 59% of the population of Eau Nghia live in hamlets where there is not now and has not been a GVN presence, civil or military.

11. The above standard categories are based on areas of GVN activity. They do not coincide with the more relevant categories: (a) population controlled by the VC, or (b) population sympathetic to the VC. The 41%-59% GVN/VC breakdown probably understates VC control and overstates VC sympathy. The geographic breakdown for these latter categories would be different and hard to show on a map.

(a) Even a "secured" hamlet that has met the six-point criterion might well, in fact, have made an accommodation with and be controlled by the VC. And most of the hamlets in the "cleared" category are actually controlled by the VC.

(b) Many, perhaps most, of the people in VC-controlled hamlets are not sympathetic to the VC (little evidence is available for basing even a rough estimate). On the other hand, many even in secure hamlets or the province capital itself are probably sympathetic to the VC: in particular, the wives, sisters, parents and brothers -- including refugees -- of men in the VC.

12. Out of 250-300 hamlets in the province (census information in large "VC-controlled" areas of the province is uncertain; the population is listed as 226,000 but may be as high as 260,000), 127 are scheduled for pacification. Of the latter, only 28 have hamlet chiefs (since writing this, one has been kidnapped), and of these, only 17 are working in the hamlet. All of the hamlets "not scheduled for pacification" can be presumed to have a hamlet chief picked by the VC -- this the VC do not neglect -- and in other hamlets without a GVN village chief there will be a VC representative whose authority will be more or less open and unchallenged.

13. Although the area of current VC control may cover 85% or more of the population of Hau Nghia, the degree of control varies considerably, as would the difficulty of wresting control away from the VC. Many of the hamlets and roads are under VC control only by default of the GVN. The control may mean no more than that a village chief must be acceptable to the local VC agents, and cannot enforce decisions that they disapprove. Hamlets -- and roads -- may be abandoned by GVN officials because of the existence of a small amount of risk. But in many areas that the GVN has virtually abandoned, the VC have not moved in energetically to organize and proselyte, recruit, tax and indoctrinate; the VC presence may -- as yet -- be felt as lightly as the GVN's ever was. All it would take to cut their authority there would be an improvement in security and a GVN presence.

On the other hand, in many other villages where only the VC, never the GVN, has spoken to the people for a long time, both chief and council will be thoroughly indoctrinated and perhaps Party members; there will be an elaborate Liberation Front administrative and control structure, and every family has sons fighting in "their" army, the Liberation Army. Even in hamlets that have been nominally "secured," the administration may have made its accommodation with the VC and the Popular Forces may be heavily infiltrated by VC, drawing GVN pay and mining roads by night. (On July 28, 11 civilians were killed when a Lambretta bus hit a mine that had been laid by a VC-PF and 2 fellow VCs; 4 other PFs had known of the mine but had said nothing.)

14. When the VC do sleep, they sleep in hamlets in beds; the guerrillas in hamlets throughout the province, the regional force battalions in the more outlying, more secure (for VC) villages. But they don't sleep much. As interrogations have shown they get up at 0430 for calisthenics, spend the day training, building constructions, receiving indoctrination, manning lookouts, etc. They do their moving between 1900 and 2300, mounting attacks, when they do, mainly between 0100 and 0300.

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15. Government cadre, on the other hand, sleep a lot, both day and night. "From all we've seen," said an advisor, "the APAs (Armed Propaganda Teams; mainly equivalent to PATs, Political Action Teams, both now receiving the same training at Vung Tau) in this province do exactly the same things as the other cadre." What is that? "Sleep, mainly, during the day. When we go through a hamlet, any hour -- not just siesta -- we'll see a rifle outside the door, and inside the APA trooper, taking a nap. Same with the VIS cadre. The people who own the huts don't seem to mind; they're used to it."

When any of them do work, they concentrate entirely on filling the six-point criteria for a pacified hamlet. This mainly consists of putting up a fence or barbed wire (perfectly useless," the advisors agree) to satisfy the requirement for "defenses." They also conduct a census, and recruit Popular Force troops, many of whom in this province receive no training whatever.

Not one of these activities is of any interest to the villagers themselves. It appeared, from what I heard, that they are working to satisfy the needs of the district and province chiefs, and their Ministries -- in particular, the need to show a number of villages that meet the letter of the six-point criteria, not the needs or desires of the villagers. The advisors agreed; that was the way the villagers saw it, and that's the way it was.

There were exceptions. Cadre and APAs, along with troops, had helped restore some huts that had been torn down by the VC a couple of weeks before. The VC had come back and torn them down again at night, however. (I visited this hamlet during the day; the destruction appeared to have been quite selective and deliberate in its targets.)

16. "The VC cadre are just much more competent than ours," an advisor observed. He went on: "Look at the VC Chieu Hoi program. This month they got a hamlet chief to defect to them with a squad of PFs; the next week they came back and destroyed the other PF squad in the village. At the same time, the VIS cadre were ambushed and destroyed and another hamlet chief has defected. Now there's no GVN presence there at all. We never have anything to show like that."

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17. Overall, the advisors felt that their efforts were almost wholly wasted. Light work, but frustrating. It was hard for them to think of any area of their advice that was not ignored. The deputy sector advisor qualified this: "You might conclude from what you've been hearing that it wouldn't make any difference at all if we left." Other advisors nodded at this. "But even though you may look at an operation and it looks as if they've ignored our advice completely, the fact remains that if we weren't here, they simply wouldn't be doing half these operations at all." On the other hand, since the ARVN operations have so little effect, this is questionable comfort.

"The two USOM advisors have more influence and more effect than the 25 of us MACV advisors," one advisor commented. (He himself, as S-5 advisor on Civil Affairs and Psywar -- his background is all in tanks -- spends two weeks out of each month preparing the two --duplicatory-- monthly reports for the sector.)

18. In the course of the day, I had the chance to watch an operation unfold, as we talked in the Operations Center, that illustrated most of the points covered in my two-day course in Hau Nghia.

At 1030, while we were talking, the I&R platoon had sent in "A-1 intelligence; they've got contact." The deputy province chief for security wanted to call in artillery and an air strike; but the S-3 advisor worked on him for an hour to persuade him to try a ground operation, and by 1130 he succeeded. The objective was a row of hamlets along a road; a ranger battalion was to proceed north and search these hamlets, while a company stationed at the other side of the hamlets was to move south into a blocking position, just outside the northernmost hamlet. The deputy drove over to the ranger battalion to explain this plan on the map, and the units moved out about 1230.

Late that afternoon, I got the rest of the story from the S-3. While the units were moving, he had gotten word from the US pilot of an observation plane that a dozen black-clad men had run down the road in the objective area and had vanished into huts in the northernmost hamlet. The advisor passed this on to both units. (This was a mistake it turned out.) A little later he heard from the US sergeant accompanying the ranger battalion that the battalion was stopping short of the hamlet reported to contain VC; they were turning back, after searching only the southern hamlets. The S-3 advisor reported this to the deputy for security by radio; he then suggested to the blocking company, through an American advisor with it, that they move ahead into the northern hamlet. It did not.

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The operation was a complete failure. The VC -- observed firing on the ground, then seen from the air -- were not brought into contact.

The failure of either unit to occupy and search the northern hamlet -- as explicitly called for in their original orders reemphasized after the pilot's report -- was confirmed by the pilot when he landed, after watching all movements from the air. It was also reported, afterwards, by the Americans with both units. The advisor passed this on to the deputy for security, when he returned. "The deputy told me," said the advisor, "they did search all the hamlets, just as they were supposed to." "What did you say to that?" I asked. "I said, OK." After a pause, I asked: "Why did you say that?" "Well, I'd already told him they didn't do it. He said they did. What more was there to say?"

I wanted to get the point clear that the original orders had been explicit on searching that hamlet; he agreed that the battalion had disobeyed its clear orders, in addition to ignoring the later air report (i.e., in truth, using it to avoid going where VC were to be found). Nevertheless, the advisor was quite heartened by the day's events. "I look at it this way," he said; "They did go out. If I hadn't been pushing them, they would never have gone out at all."

(An experienced observer's comment on his reaction: "And by behaving as he did -- failing to go to his sector advisor, and to the province chief, or the division advisor, to "recommend" that they be made to carry out their orders -- he was making it that much more certain that the next time that battalion went out, they'd behave just the same way.") This advisor had been in this particular job only two months; it might take six more before he noticed that his "partial victories" nearly always ended alike in total failure to achieve the intended result. But then it would be time for him to leave, turning over the job to a successor who would again, for six months or so, take comfort in "successes" each time he got RVN to move, despite some disappointment that they stopped a little short of target. (Next time maybe they'll make contact.")

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December 2, 1965

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Visit to an Insecure Province

Dan Ellsberg

PART III: Vann Theses

1. John Paul Vann has been well-known -- both during his 1962-63 tour as Senior Advisor to 7th Division (which then involved responsibility covering eight Delta provinces) and in his recent 10 months in Hau Nghia -- for his cold, jaundiced, cheerless (read "negative" and "troublemaking") view of the situation as it existed, and specifically of the performance and effectiveness of the ARVN/GVN. To some extent he admits to a deliberate imbalance in his presentation. "I harp on these things all the time, just because everyone else is singing a merry tune", he said to me at one point; "If they were all discouraged, I would be saying, 'Look, it's not hopeless; here's what can be done'".

2. As a matter of fact, the adjectives above for his views are not equivalent to "pessimistic" (except on the outcome of current policies and practices) or "hopeless". Much of the time he could have been described as "optimistic" --perhaps even unrealistically so--in terms of his sense of what could be achieved, with different programs and behavior patterns.

When I asked him, Monday night, what lesson he particularly wanted me to take away from our ride through the countryside, he said immediately: "The thinness of control by either the VC or the GVN". Vann believes that control can be wrested from the VC, in many areas by rather simple changes in activity. But those "simple" changes would be revolutionary departures for ARVN and the GVN. And Vann does not think they will happen without major U.S. initiatives and interventions.

3. What Vann talks about, on the military side, is ARVN/RF/PF:

- passivity;
- lack of leadership;
- almost total reliance upon (unobserved) artillery fire and air strikes to impose casualties on the VC (and bystanders);

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- almost total unwillingness to seek, maintain or exploit ground contact with the VC.

On the civil side:

- GVN incompetence;
- lack of knowledge of and real interest in the rural population;
- Corps/Province/District preoccupation with corrupt income.

It is easy to see why such talk gets under many American skins. He is telling those responsible for changing or surmounting such performance that they have failed; he is telling those who have failed to report this behavior, or denied it, that they are concealing or lying.

Even to a disinterested listener (i.e., a newcomer) his criticisms seem intolerant and extreme. And even if their accuracy is credited, it is natural to react eventually to these acid generalizations and anecdotes: "But where is all this leading? What is the use of dwelling on these failures so much? What do you want us to do; should we just give up and get out?"

4. The fact is that Vann does draw a positive policy prescription from his negative findings: and it is not for the U.S. to get out. On the contrary, Vann's solution to the failings (and, he thinks, the incorrigibility) of the current GVN military/administrative structure is for the U.S. to intervene -- not by main force, if that can be avoided, but where and as necessary to determine that policies and programs we regard as essential are carried out. There are many aspects to his detailed proposals, but this lies at the heart of them: that the USG, in its own internal planning and in practice, accept responsibility for actual governmental performance in South Vietnam and act upon it.

5. Stated this baldly, this proposal will seem at once to have a good deal of false allure and a great many hidden traps. Vann does have three qualifications in mind, which he regards as very important, not mere after-thoughts or sops:

a) This effective intervention can and should be done gradually, at first at certain provincial levels, in separate steps that are (at least initially) hidden from public view; maximum effort would be taken throughout to preserve "face" and the facade of Vietnamese authority and control, and to gain the acquiescence of present incumbents (in part, by compensation and by protecting their prestige).

b) The U.S. takeover is to be ended piecemeal and as soon as possible by shifting responsibility to Vietnamese leadership: but to new, younger, competent leadership with roots in the provinces and with social consciousness and energy. Indeed, one of the main reasons for temporarily supplanting the current SVN administrative system is to hasten--in fact, make possible--the emergence of such Vietnamese leadership; to help find, promote, train and support leaders and cadre on a scale and of a type that would never break through in the current system. Part of this program would be greatly increased support to secondary school and higher education for rural students.

c) U.S. intervention should be, initially, concentrated in selected provinces and should to a great extent take the form of giving strong backing and support to capable Vietnamese leaders where we find them. "Priority" provinces for concentrated effort should be picked very largely on the basis of the quality of the officials in place; once picked, every effort should be made to ensure that all posts are manned by well-qualified and experienced people, including the American advisory personnel. In short, we should be exerting very heavy American influence (not "heavyhanded", but "effective"), by intervening in specific cases where necessary, to change the Vietnamese administrative pattern of ignoring talent, experience and competent performance in handing out jobs and promotions in favor of political and family associations, conservatism and payoff.

6. Some of the obvious objections to this basic approach despite the qualifications above, are:

a) The "facade" would eventually wear pretty thin, and we would lay ourselves open to charges--not only from the VC--that we had taken on a "colonialist" role. (There would be a good deal of basis for this charge; but it should be noted that, given the qualifications described above, the closest past analogy to the U.S. role would be that of a "good" colonialist power: one that was fully committed to granting full independence in the near future and that was making major, effective efforts to prepare the country for viable independence by educating the population and finding and training a spectrum of young, capable leaders and administrators. In other words, the closest colonial analogy would be British policy in Malaya under Templer, not French policy in either Indochina or Algeria).

b) Any colonial taint--even "good" colonialism--might smell pretty bad to the Vietnamese, and might at last give the VC the ideological tool that would give them committed mass support.

c) Would US-made decisions necessarily be all that good, or appropriate to Vietnamese circumstances? Would we really do better than the current GVN? Are there really enough qualified, motivated, experienced Americans for the job?

d) Vann may underestimate the difficulties of getting from here to there, and overestimate the power of the U.S. forces and financial support in bridging that gap: i.e., in enabling us to demand and achieve much broader and more direct influence. The current leadership network might choose to resist strongly--and to organize national resistance--to a reduction in "Vietnamese" (i.e., their) authority, even if compensation were arranged.

7. Yet it must be said that Vann's proposal has the merit of being relevant to some profoundly serious problems of implementation, and its radical nature is appropriate to the urgency and intractability of these problems. Moreover, it reflects judgments that have a good deal of evidence going for them. Those who reject his solution should be prepared to argue that their programs meet equally realistically the facts of life on "the way the system works now". Those who reject his judgments must test theirs against the same facts. And any who reject this approach on its face simply because it departs too radically from current policy, probably haven't faced the current problems squarely.

8. The night before our trip, at a USOM seminar for province reps, Vann commented thus on Bernie Yoh's account of Father Hoa's success: "One common thread runs through every success story in Vietnam, whether it's Father Hoa, the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, the Catholic refugees -- it is that something has substituted itself for the authority of the corrupt, incompetent GVN."

The familiar postulate that "The war must be won by the Vietnamese" usually conceals the hidden assumption that the war must be won by "these" Vietnamese, the ones who head and run the system right now, in Saigon, Corps and provinces. It is not logically guaranteed that this particular set of Vietnamese--with their constricted backgrounds and orientation (quite apart from their competence or dedication, which may be considerable) -- will or can win this war. It may be that new leadership is, very simply, a requirement: as one analyst puts it, "leaders who come from, think like, and are responsive to the majority of the population". If so; is the present leadership class going to allow these new leaders to emerge, in time, without considerable U.S. intervention?

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A great range of motives and instincts caution us away from U.S. "meddling" in internal affairs, and toward accommodation with whatever leaders we find behind the right desks. But it is our responsibility to apply certain tests to the policy of "do-it-through-the (current)-Saigonese": Do we believe this is going to work? Will what we think must be done, actually get done? If we believe that, why do we? If not, what then will happen? How bad is that?

9. We may believe the present leadership group can reform itself, and that our best course is to help it do so. Or, we may pin our hopes on starting an evolutionary process in motion -- perhaps by the beginnings of representative government -- that will eventually transform the nature of the government, its personnel and its elan. In either case, it is still important to see clearly what the actual workings of the present system are, and how they must change. It is no longer sound to hope that all difficulties will dissolve eventually in the friendly atmosphere engendered by Candide-like "optimism" and self-maintained ignorance of realities.

One of Vann's most notorious theses since early 1963 -- one that has made few friends for him -- is that our advisory reporting system, and the Saigon reporting to Washington, has systematically underplayed or concealed the harsh facts on ARVN and GVN performance. In effect, we have identified with the allies we are advising and have applied the rule, "Don't be a knocker, look at the bright side" as we might to our own units. This comes especially naturally to newcomers, anxious to give their counterparts the benefit of the doubt, unaware of old patterns, and happy with small "partial victories" of influence that stop short of achieving any effect in the field (see the anecdote above, Part I-C); with the one-year turnover in advisors, this alone accounts for much of the bias. For the old-timers, to report ARVN patterns realistically is to report failure to influence and to report fully earlier. And finally, Vann maintains, there has been a steadily decreasing tendency for U.S. personnel to know how ARVN troops are actually behaving in the field, because it is increasingly rare for any Americans in Vietnam (except regularly-assigned battalion advisors) to have had the experience of actually walking through an operation, let alone seeing combat, with Vietnamese frontline units. (Sub-sector advisor teams are the closest exception, though even they, like battalion advisors, tend to stay close to the command post). The same applies to Vietnamese officers above company grade.

He suggests the question: What is the percentage of actions with contact in which an American was involved?

And what is that percentage for actions of company size and below? Both percentages, he suspects, are very low, the second extremely so. American participation in ARVN operations, he feels, is becoming increasingly high-level and abstract: and uninformed. This is one subject on which the hundred-plus operations Bann walked through as 7th Division advisor give him a particular expertise.

On his observation this last year, he believes the same lack of direct, personal observation of operations outside province and district towns to apply to representatives and USOM staff in Saigon. (He has recommended that every U.S. unit in South Vietnam of company size or larger have as one of its top three officers a man with a year's field experience in South Vietnam; he has recommended to USOM that every USOM official in Saigon spend, periodically, at least a week in one province as an observer with the provincial team).

10. To say, as Vann does, that the present leaders, bureaucrats and province and district officials do not come from or think like the majority of the population, do not know much at all about rural majority, and for the most part are not very interested in making government responsive to the wishes of the majority, may be unpleasant. But it is to say something that is very important about the nature of the problems here.

To say, as Vann does, that ARVN/RF/PF forces, with relatively rare exceptions, abandon the countryside to the VC every night; do not use recon patrols, to develop or check intelligence; do not seek ground contact with the VC, and do not maintain it or pursue when the VC are encountered; do not control by observers the artillery fire by which (along with air) they produce most casualties (enemy and friendly); do not take steps to maintain the security of their operations; do huddle in static, defensive positions and take nearly all their casualties on the defensive; is to say a lot of nasty things, not only about the ARVN but about the effective influence of U.S. advisors, who have harped on these matters for four years. It is also to say some true and important things about the reasons for VC military growth and success, and to suggest the need for putting teeth in the advisory system or else finding an alternative to it.

11. In a recent paper, "Harnessing the Revolution in South Vietnam", Vann limited himself in his recommendations purely to an experiment in civil reforms in several selected provinces. Briefly, he proposed a unified chain of command down to Province Chief and below, with control by the Province Chief of all resources--men, money and material--located in or allocated to his province. The Province Chief would have full authority over his district

chiefs and over all cadre, who would be consolidated. He would be able, within certain limits, to transfer funds within his budget. All GVN personnel in the province would receive Motivational Indoctrination training; simplified systems of administration and funding would be used; and the U.S. advisory presence would be considerably expanded, with the advisors to "eat, live and work" with their counterparts. (For other aspects, and detailed discussion, see his paper; and also a long, well-written critique on related matters by Doug Ramsey, "Need for a New Political Approach").

12. However, privately, Vann would grant military reforms even higher urgency (to be pursued simultaneously). His proposals are far-reaching:

- a) Disband most ARVN divisions (perhaps leaving one or two in I Corps, as counter-invasion force).
- b) Give most forces to province chiefs, consolidating ARVN/RF/PF.
- c) Leave Corps headquarters with some reserve and reaction forces: helicopter companies, helicopters, paratroops, M-113s; Corps to have a military role only. (Vann has in the past suggested abolishing Corps instead of division; his current feeling is that more useful decentralization is achieved by abolishing division).
- d) All forces, beginning with officers and NCOs, to receive Motivational Indoctrination.
- e) A major program of battlefield commissions, for immediate tactical command, to experienced NCOs: waiving the current requirement for a high school diploma.
- f) No fixed operating bases for the consolidated ARVN/RF/PF forces. No home base, with dependents. (Rest areas for periodic leaves, with family housing). Abolition of all fixed defenses; no barbed wire. (The psychological and operational effects of wire and defenses, in South Vietnam, simply outweigh the benefits.)
- g) Units to be continuously in the field, with emphasis on small-unit operations, night patrols and ambushes, backed up by fast-reaction reserves at Corps (or at dispersed reserve locations in II Corps).
- h) "Advice" by U.S. advisors with tactical units to be backed up -- unless demonstrated have been unscound -- by higher-level U.S. advisors and, where necessary, higher authority: using a range of influences.

i) The burden of fixing and eliminating VC main force units would fall upon U.S. forces, which would operate in battalion strength, not patrols, and which would not be tied up in clear-and-hold or rice harvesting operations. ("U.S. troops aren't as well suited to patrols in South Vietnam; can't interrogate, can't move across terrain as well as good ARVN troops." Vann would recommend that U.S. forces patrol extensively now, only because no one else is doing it). ARVN would serve as eyes and ears, intelligence and recon. ARVN patrols (above) would be mainly for recon, with ARVN reserves to help patrols destroy guerrilla forces when found, but with U.S. reaction forces taking over the job against sizeable VC units.

The priority Vann attaches to these reforms reflects his belief that the immediate task for the GVN to concentrate on, with U.S. help, is achieving military ascendancy over the VC. Vann's recommendations (which are not within the area of his current responsibilities) may or may not be the best ones. But they are addressed to important questions: Can the people of South Vietnam be protected from VC terrorism and guerrilla attacks without a radical change in the employment and effectiveness of South Vietnamese troops? If not, what changes are needed, and how are they to be achieved?

Daniel Ellsberg